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## The Force of the Blow – Traumatic Memory in Virginia Woolf’s Writing

**Abstract:** Virginia Woolf’s notion of memory, outlined in her memoir “A Sketch of the Past”, destabilises conventional conceptions of the relation between past and present. For Woolf, memory escapes linear time: past and presence no longer follow each other chronologically. Paradoxically, remembered scenes render the past present. It is important to note that only special experiences, characterised as moments of being, have this potential. In contrast to everyday life, which is “not lived consciously”, moments of being are described as “sudden, violent shocks”, remembered “forever”. At the same time, moments of being are only created in retrospect, when they are written down. In this sense, one can observe a striking parallel between Woolf’s moments of being and the notion of traumatic memory outlined by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The article shall focus on the way in which traumatic memories find their way into Virginia Woolf’s literary texts. References to traumatic events like World War I do not occur in the form of narrated past events, but as memory traces articulating themselves in a symptomatic and performative manner. Thus, traumatic memories are preserved in her words as present symptoms that are encountered and acted out by the readers.

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Intersections of memory and trauma in Virginia Woolf’s writing have been widely discussed in recent years<sup>1</sup>. The present article focuses on how structures of traumatic memory conflating past and presence can be traced in her texts. Rather than concentrating on narrations of trauma and representations of traumatised characters,<sup>2</sup> I want to elaborate on the way in which memory traces articulate themselves in a symptomatic and performative manner in Woolf’s novels and autobiographical writings on a textual level. The analysis of how trau-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Eberly and Henke 2007; Moran 2007, etc.

<sup>2</sup> This is done, for example, by Karen DeMeester when she analyses the shell-shocked veteran Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* in her article “Trauma and Recovery in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*” (cf. DeMeester 1998).

matic memories are processed in her texts does not attempt to decrypt Woolf's personal traumatic experiences "as a (female) survivor of incest and a vulnerable noncombatant in a nation at war" (Eberly and Henke 2007, 6). Instead, it shall be investigated how actualised, non-representative, performative memory traces in Woolf's writing open a relation to the readers, involving them in processes of acting out and working through trauma.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the overlap of past and present inherent in Woolf's notion of traumatic memory exceeds the fictional frame and the pages of the books.

As a first step, it is crucial to portray Virginia Woolf's notion of memory, outlined in her often-quoted autobiographical memoir "A Sketch of the Past". For Woolf, memory escapes linear time: past and presence no longer follow each other chronologically and conventional conceptions of the relation between past and present are destabilised. The memory of the past is from the start invested with the present. While commenting on one of her most important childhood memories when she was lying in the nursery in their holiday home in St. Ives, "hearing the waves breaking" (Woolf 1967, 64) she mentions the following:

That is, I suppose, that my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen. In certain favourable moods, memories – what one has forgotten – come to top. Now if this is so, is it not possible – I often wonder – that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? ... I see it – the past – as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still are the garden and the nursery. (Woolf 1985, 67)

First, the claim that memory supplies what Woolf has forgotten is puzzling. One usually assumes that something is either remembered, or forgotten. Here we can observe a very important trait of Woolf's conception of memory: it brings back something which was gone – forgotten. In other words, it brings something unconscious back to consciousness. Consequently, for the subject who remembers, the memory seems unrelated to the self: it seems "as if it" were happening independently. In the next sentence, Woolf puts into question whether the forgotten past really "took place" at all at some stage. She challenges the assumption that the forgotten past had an existence independent from the memory by claiming that she in fact made it happen. Of course one may assume that what she makes happen is the process of remembering, but the sentence is ambiguous and also allows another reading: that the forgotten past is only pro-

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<sup>3</sup> The notions of acting out and working through are discussed by Dominick La Capra in the chapter titled "Trauma, Absence, Loss" of his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, cf. La Capra 2001.

duced in the memory process. Woolf then goes on to outline a very peculiar and remarkably different conception of memory: she speculates that it has an existence or reality independent of our mind and is therefore literally present all the time and sometimes shows up. This notion is further stressed later in the text:

This confirms me in my instinctive notion: (it will not bear arguing about; it is irrational) the sensation that we are sealed vessels afloat on what it is convenient to call reality; and at some moments, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is, these [memory] scenes – for why do they survive undamaged year after year unless they are made of something comparatively permanent? (Woolf 1985, 142)

It is important to note that only special experiences have the potential to stay in existence, namely “things felt with great intensity”. Later in the text, such intense experiences are characterised as “exceptional moments” of being (Woolf 1985, 71). In contrast to everyday life, which is “not lived consciously” (Woolf 1985, 70), a moment of being is described as a “sudden, violent shock ... that I have remembered ... all my life” (Woolf 1985, 71). Woolf describes most of the moments of being as terrible experiences that make her aware of her powerlessness. Examples for shocking moments of being are experiences of violence, like a fight with her brother, or the horror of a friend’s suicide (Woolf 1985, 71–72). There is only one moment of being which Woolf considers as delightful: an epiphanic revelation triggered by a flower: “‘That is the whole’, I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was part of the earth” (Woolf 1985, 71). The individual flower suddenly becomes “the whole”. Woolf mentions that the epiphanic moment of wholeness is created in retrospect. Only after developing a certain distance to it, a moment of being can be considered a valuable thing.

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost the power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. (Woolf 1985, 72)

Woolf stresses that the wholeness embodied by the flower is constituted by her act of putting it “into words”. The narrative rendering of a shock provides a distance and coherence, as severed parts are put together in the process. After mentioning that “a shock is at once followed by the desire to explain it” (Woolf 1985, 72), which still implies a linear temporal order of a shocking event preceding a written or verbal explanation of it, Woolf goes on as follows:

I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not ... simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. (Woolf 1985, 72)

Other than before, the shocking blow no longer exists as such before it is rendered in this explanation: it is only ‘made real’ by being put “into words”. Here, we encounter a structurally similar contradiction as in her characterisation of memory, where Woolf *both* recounted the conventional idea that a past event is remembered later *and* suggested that the past is only created in the process of memory.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the reference of the “real thing behind” resonates with Woolf’s third twist to her outline of memory, that “we are sealed vessels afloat on what it is convenient to call reality” (Woolf 1985, 142). The time-transcending permanence of a memory-substance or “reality” that floods in when our “sealing matter cracks” (Woolf 1985, 142) indeed mirrors the “token of some real thing behind appearances” revealing itself when one experiences a blow. At first sight, the structure of memory and of moments of being outlined by Woolf seems contradictory and inconsistent: empirical (memory follows an experienced event), constructivist (the past event is only created in the memory process) and metaphysical (the past exists independently and transcends time) views seem to collide. A possible reconciliation between the three positions can be derived from the way in which Woolf continues her elaboration on moments of being:

[A]t any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven, certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words, we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (Woolf 1985, 72)

As in the description of the epiphany triggered by the flower, a sense of connection and wholeness is crucial to the moment of being. What Woolf highlights more clearly here is the aesthetic nature of the shocks, their strong tie to artworks. The seemingly meta-physical pattern beyond appearances described as being no more and no less than this relation between humans and artwork revealed in a shocking moment and triggered by a shocking event. In such a relation, the three seemingly contradictory views on memory and moments of being are joined. An artwork implies a creation of something that did not exist before: a book is only made real by words, for example. The creation of an artwork is most commonly triggered by events that really happened in a chronological

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<sup>4</sup> The contradiction is exacerbated in the context of moments of being, which are described as experiences that are remembered forever. That something forgotten is recreated and thus *created* by memory seems more plausible than that a memorable revelation caused by a blow is only created in the process of recounting it.

timeline; the work itself is embedded in chronological time: it can be dated to a certain period and so on. At the same time, it transcends time: an artwork remains over centuries if it is revived again and again by its recipients; readers and viewers, “we”, finally take the place of its creators (e.g. Shakespeare or Beethoven). What Woolf claims to see when she has a shock, is the seemingly contradictory connection of the positions outlined by her separately beforehand, embodied by the relation between humans and artworks. That memory, moments of being and writing are inseparable for her is stressed when she mentions that “[t]he shock receiving capacity is what makes me a writer” (Woolf 1985, 72).

A quote from her essay “Craftsmanship”, where Woolf describes words as bearers of memory, shall further elucidate that the connection to art, in her case literature, reconciles the contradictory remarks in “A Sketch of the Past” discussed above. Moreover, one can find clearer suggestions regarding *how* literature contains implications of memory and how it may figure as a hidden pattern connecting ‘us’.

Words, English words are full of echoes, of memories, of associations ...; they are so stored with meanings, with memories ... (Woolf 1942, 129). They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things (Woolf 1942, 130) ...; they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change. (Woolf 1942, 131)

In this description, Woolf addresses the fact that words have the capacity to break away from a writer’s intention in order to assume a life of their own. The memories they are stored with may thus well be ones that the author is not consciously aware of. In this sense, Woolf’s description of words is remarkably consistent with her outline of memory in “A Sketch of the Past”. Woolf’s claim that memory seems to be independent even though she makes it happen, supplies what she has forgotten and is still in existence, can be transferred to what she claims about words: words are independent from us, even though their use and combination results in a text written, made happen by us. By hosting memories, they can supply us with what we have forgotten, or never experienced – the forgotten or repressed past may descend upon a writer while rereading what he has written, or readers may be confronted with a past they never went through. Words can be considered as instances of present, materialised memories – strange independent manifestations of past experiences having an autonomous existence throughout time. Words are indeed present before a writer, and later before a reader, while at the same time being invested with the past – they constitute a pattern connecting Woolf as a writer and us as readers with the work of literature they constitute. Thus, when taking into account the relation of memory to literature and the nature of words, the claims that it “is only by put-

ting it into words that I make it whole”, “I make it real by putting it into words” and “we are the words” in fact form a tightly intertwined web.

After having outlined Woolf’s conception of memory and its poetological implications, I want to elaborate on the widely discussed observation that moments of being display a structure of traumatic memory.<sup>5</sup> As already mentioned, Woolf designates the moments as painful, “sudden, violent shocks”. The sudden and ungraspable blow from a “hidden enemy” is followed by a desire to explain and render it. Only after a paradoxical narration of something that was not experienced consciously, the severed fragments experienced can be turned into a coherent picture and enjoyed. In the introduction of their book, *Virginia Woolf and Trauma: Embodied Texts*, Suzette Henke and David Eberly read the passage from “A Sketch of the Past” in terms of a concept outlined by Henke earlier<sup>6</sup>, namely scriptotherapy: “Reformulating traumatic memories by virtue of what might be called scriptotherapy, she can exorcise their debilitating intrusions” (Eberly and Henke 2007, 2).<sup>7</sup> Even though she distances herself when it comes to details, Henke’s notion of scriptotherapy goes back to Freudian psychoanalysis, especially his talking cure (Henke 1998, xi). In order to continue my argument, I want to focus on relations between Woolf and Freud, specifically the parallels between Woolf’s sketch of memory and Freud’s notion of trauma outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It is well known that Woolf was familiar with Freud’s writings, as his *Collected Papers* were published in English by the Hogarth Press which was run by Virginia and Leonard Woolf. In a diary entry from the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1939, Woolf notes that she “[b]egan reading Freud last night” (Woolf 1984, 248) and then mentions her reading experience on the following days (Woolf 1984, 249, 250). She explicitly mentions reading *Group Psychology* (Woolf 1984, 252) and she most probably refers to *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilisation and its Discontents* (Woolf 1984, 250). It is thus obvious that Woolf was concerned with Freud around the time she wrote “A Sketch of the Past”. From her diaries and letters, we do not know whether she was already reading Freud when she wrote the passages on memory discussed above, written earlier in 1939, or whether Woolf read *Beyond the Plea-*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Eberly and Henke 2007; Moran 2007.

<sup>6</sup> In *Shattered Subjects: Trauma in Women’s Life Writing*, Henke establishes the term scriptotherapy in order to investigate the therapeutic effects of writing as a way of coping with traumatic experiences (cf. Henke 1998).

<sup>7</sup> The same argument is made by Patricia Moran in her book *Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetic of Trauma*: “Indeed, writing served as a form of ‘scriptotherapy’, enabling her [Woolf] to work through painful memories and experiences. She herself famously described her ‘shock receiving capacity’ as a welcoming sign of a ‘revelation’ that she actualizes in words” (Moran 2007, 11).

*sure Principle*. Nonetheless, the analogies between Woolf's depiction of memory and Freud's notion of trauma are striking and permit a very fruitful expansion of Henke's discussions of scriptotherapy.

For Freud, the first task of the mental apparatus in case of a trauma is to master the stimulus which managed to break through its protective shield by binding it. Only after the invading stimulus of floating energy has been converted to quiescent cathexis, the pleasure principle can reign in the mental apparatus – which is analogous to Woolf's reaction to a moment of being: she has to bind the shattering impact by writing it down. Thus far, this also goes hand in hand with scriptotherapy. What Freud then further elaborates, however, exceeds the straightforward manner of the process. Interestingly, Freud claims that traumatic events are not accessible to the memory. Instead of remembering the trauma, the patients compulsively repeat them. Repetition compulsion implies that patients do not encounter the traumatic event as past but as present.

Der Kranke kann von dem in ihm Verdrängten nicht alles erinnern, vielleicht gerade das Wesentliche nicht .... Er ist vielmehr genötigt, das Verdrängte als gegenwärtiges Erlebnis zu *wiederholen*, anstatt es ... als ein Stück der Vergangenheit zu *erinnern* (Freud 1940, 16).

In terms of scriptotherapy and trauma recovery, this would be considered as unsuccessful acting out of the traumatic event instead of a healing working through. However, Woolf's notion of memory seems to correspond precisely to Freud's claim. Woolf suggests that she renders the past as present and states that some memories “can still be more real than the present moment” (Woolf 1985, 67). Moreover, it has already been discussed that Woolf is aware that not all memories are conscious before they are rendered. Woolf's paradox of recounting and producing the traumatic moment at the same time correlates to Freud's claim that trauma can be seen as a gap in conscious memory. Freud states that “consciousness arises instead of a memory-trace” and he raises the hypothesis that “becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are processes incompatible with each other in the same system” (Freud 1978, 25). The radical speculation that memory is never conscious implies that an unconscious traumatic event cannot be consciously remembered and therefore represents an absence in the system of consciousness. The idea that something is repeated which has never been there in the same system suggests that this something is produced rather than repeated – like Woolf's moments, which she makes real. One could read Woolf's repeated attempts to narrate the childhood memories' immediate presence in “A Sketch of the Past” as repetition compulsion of something that cannot be regained. Certain elements of the childhood memories she describes are not only repeated throughout “A Sketch of the Past”, but also emerge in her novels. For example, the waves, heard in her

memory of the nursery, play an important role in many of Woolf's novels like *The Waves*, *Jacob's Room*, *The Voyage Out* or *To the Lighthouse*. Repetition compulsion is in some cases conceived as a form of mastery. Through repetition, the person gains an active role in the traumatic event and is therefore able to control it. This goes hand in hand with Woolf's claim that she is able to enjoy the shocks she experienced after having them written down. At the same time, mastery over the traumatic event by repetition compulsion implies that the trauma is also (re)produced. Let us thus hold that traumatic memory in Woolf's writing seems to imply two things: 1) a scriptotherapeutic gesture of coming to terms with shattering impacts by putting them into words and thereby ordering them and taking a distance; 2) a process of repetition compulsion in which the unconscious, unprocessed past emerges as a present symptom.

In the discussion of "A Sketch of the Past" above, Woolf's emphasis on the connection between artwork, author and recipients, on the "we", has been stressed. The twofold aspects of writing down traumatic memories can be further elaborated with this in mind. In trauma theory, it is often stressed that coping with traumatic memory "has no social component, it is not addressed to anybody ... it is a solitary activity" (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995, 163). In his analysis of the Buffalo Creek flood 1972, Kai T. Erikson makes a similar observation concerning collective trauma:

By collective trauma ... I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. ... As people begin to emerge hesitantly from their protective shells into which they have withdrawn, they learn that they are isolated and alone, wholly dependent on their own individual resources. 'I' continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. 'You' continues to exist, though distanced and hard to relate to. But 'we' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body (Erikson 1985, 154).

In a later text, "Notes on Trauma and Community", Erikson then explains how a sense of community can be regained when a collective trauma is worked through:

[T]raumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos – a group culture – that is different from (and more than) the sum of private wounds that make it up. Trauma, that is, has a social dimension. Let me begin by suggesting that trauma can create community. (Erikson 1995, 185)

The sense of community shattered by the traumatic event is rebuilt when people are "drawn to others similarly marked" (Erikson 1995, 186). The argument I want to follow here is that the isolating effects of trauma may open to a sense of community again in the process of coming to terms with it. Concerning Virginia Woolf's writing, Erikson's explanation how a new sense of community can



be created is not very helpful: whereas he is concerned with people who experienced the same traumatic experience, Woolf's texts address readers who in most cases did not share any shattering events with the author. Nonetheless, I would argue that Woolf creates a sense of community, of "we", in her literary renderings of traumatic events. Going back to Judith Hermann, Suzette Henke also argues that rebuilding community is essential for trauma recovery (Henke 1998, xvii) and suggests that writing can help to do so:

Testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression or victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone or no-one ... No matter. (Henke 1998, xix)

Henke implies that the mere act of addressing and narrating the traumatic event is healing, as it contains sharing and thus breaks the isolation caused by trauma. I want to carry this discussion forward by analysing the more specific way in which Woolf integrates traumatic memories in her texts. Here, I want to go back to the two aspects mentioned above, the sense of mastery over the traumatic event through narrative rendering and the symptomatic re-emergence of past events as present experiences. While Woolf may well have found a cure for her own traumata by writing them down, the texts in which they are rendered do not present coherent narratives of a past worked through. Patricia Moran observes that rather than "'working through' the trauma and developing coherent narratives that integrate traumatic events", Woolf seems "far more interested in the ways in which traumatic events impinge on the working of memory" (Moran 2007, 4–5). Shattering traumatic impacts are thus reproduced in her texts rather than overcome. If traumatic memory is re-enacted in the texts, the ones who are affected by it are "we", the readers.<sup>8</sup> We, however are not

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<sup>8</sup> This is also suggested by Clifford E. Wulfman in his article "Woolf and the Discourse of Trauma: The Little Language of *The Waves*". Also referring to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and memories beyond consciousness, Wulfman states the following: "But precisely because traumatic events are buried and unavailable, they motivate the relentless memory-search that one might call fiction. When applied to Freud's model, Woolf's task of fiction is to re-create trauma's stimulus upon the membrane of consciousness" (Wulfman 2007, 160). He further argues that "this attempt at re-creation is directed at a consciousness – that of the reader – that has never experienced the original stimulus. The task of fiction is therefore fundamentally a traumatic response: the repeated attempt to declaim an event that has been missed, in an effort to transmit it to the reader" (Wulfman 2007, 161). Wulfman then focuses on the way in which a breakdown of narrative in *The Waves* reproduces trauma. Also Patricia Moran concentrates on how the pre-narrative, fragmented, bodily nature of traumatic experiences are recreated by narrative strategies in Woolf's writing (Moran 2007, 5). Sharing Wulfman's and Moran's initial positions, I want to concentrate on the level of the signifiers rather than on narrative strategies in my analysis of Woolf's texts.

thrown back into an isolated process of re-traumatisation, but encounter the building of a literary community in a Rancièrian sense<sup>9</sup>: that an aesthetic rupture or break constitutes “the link between the solitude of the artwork and human community” (Rancière 2011, 55).

This thesis shall now be substantiated with a closer look at ways in which traumatic memories find their way into Virginia Woolf’s literary texts. That they do play a role can be assumed, as Woolf stresses their literary nature and claims that they are the origin of her writing impulse. Rather than focusing on the private childhood memories depicted in “A Sketch of the Past”, I want to show how the collective traumatic impact of World War I<sup>10</sup> can be traced in her novels<sup>11</sup>, precisely because Virginia Woolf did not experience the war on the battlefield, but only witnessed the effects of the it indirectly in her daily life as a civilian. In order to investigate the structure of traumatic memories that go back to events not at all or not consciously experienced, this seems more appropriate than analysing traumatic experiences Woolf claims to remember, such as the sexual abuse recounted in “A Sketch of the Past”. In contrast, Woolf mentions WWI only marginally: in her letters, for example, she tells amongst other things how she took shelter in the cellar of her house in Richmond during air raids – waiting and listening to the bombs dropping. Obviously, the war was on everyone’s lips, and as an eager reader of the newspaper Woolf witnessed the public discourse on it. Undeniably, even the mediated insight into what happened on the battlefields and in the trenches had a shattering impact on the people. The nature of war had changed radically with industrial warfare: the unprecedented number of losses caused by technically improved weaponry rendered the heroism and glory formerly associated with war obsolete – the only outcome of the war was death and destruction on a massive scale. Whereas this impact of WWI was very clear to everyone, the concrete horrors of the war remained in the dark for civilians. Newspaper recounts and the public discourse about WWI only revealed bits and pieces of information. As Vincent Sherry claims in his book *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*, “the most expressive record of the meaning of this war lies in the failure of language” (Sherry 2003, 274). The details of the war and its destructive scale could not be named; it became unspeakable. Accordingly, in order to trace memories of WWI in texts of a civilian, we have to pay attention to what is not explicitly said or only hinted at.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community”, Rancière 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Hereafter abbreviated as WWI.

<sup>11</sup> As Karen L. Levenback claims, Woolf “successfully negotiates the challenge caused by remembering war and death in a world intent on forgetting them both” (Levenback 1999, 89).

References to WWI in Woolf's texts are mostly indirect and related to private daily life. For example, in *Mrs. Dalloway* we are faced with a character after he came back from the war. Instead of narrating his experiences of the war, Woolf chooses to show its symptomatic effects. The shell-shocked veteran Septimus Smith finds his double in the housewife Clarissa Dalloway, as the two are arranged as analogous characters. Often, Woolf's references to the war are not only indirect, but also bear impersonal traits.<sup>12</sup> In *Jacob's Room*, the eponymous protagonist has the surname Flanders, a region at the Western Front which became emblematic for the huge scale of lives lost on the battlefield.<sup>13</sup> Jacob's wish for glory and greatness results in his death in WWI and all that remains of him is a room full of useless objects. In *To the Lighthouse*, to give another example, the middle part centres on a deserted house which is invaded by nature and where emptied words take on a life of their own. This passage is pervaded by square brackets in which certain events during WWI are referred to in telegram style, imitating the language in which contemporary newspapers reported events of the war.<sup>14</sup> All events mentioned are related to the family who formerly inhabited the house. For example, it is told that one son of the family, Andrew Ramsay, died in the war. While the events referring to what actually happened during the war are shortened to gaps, a martial action takes place in a transferred manner on the textual level by the invasion of nature and the play of signifiers largely bereft of meaning.

Before looking at Woolf's signifiers and the re-traumatising effect they have on the ones reading them in more detail, it is important to make a slight detour and elaborate on an argument made by the German literary critic Karl Heinz Bohrer. In his book *Ekstasen der Zeit*, concerned with the present, the moment and memory, Bohrer stresses the importance of differentiating between subjective private memory and objective public memory as well as between conscious and unconscious memory. Bohrer designates the texts of modernist writers like Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust as examples for expressions of unconscious, private memory. In an imaginative manner, these texts restore the past in the present (Bohrer 2003, 11) in epiphanic memory-moments exceeding a chronological order. This is very much in line with my own reading of Virginia Woolf's conception of memory. Bohrer claims that one can learn something from this

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<sup>12</sup> As Karen L. Levenback claims, the "consequences of war (like death) are depersonalized and obscured" in Woolf's texts (Levenback 1999, 90).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Sherry 2003, 270.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Roger Poole's comments in his article "'We All Put Up with You, Virginia': Irreceivable Wisdom about War": "Personal experience is reduced to a bare statement of fact, life and death are reduced to an item of news" (Poole 1991, 84).

creative, aesthetic memory for historical memory: historical remembering is not a compilation of facts and events in the past (Bohrer 2003, 12), and the past is never independent of the present. At the same time, Bohrer insists that we have to differentiate between historical and poetic memory despite the common ground they share (Bohrer 2003, 13). Bohrer claims that aesthetic memory has nothing to do with a reservoir of reality, but with a non-representational capability of producing the aesthetic (Bohrer 2003, 33). However, the ‘reality’ of unconscious traumatic memories as Freud outlines them is not directly accessible – they cannot be represented, but only be produced aesthetically. This does not mean that there are no relations to (a past) reality and such relations are most convincingly articulated in aesthetic renderings departing from straightforward storytelling. Bohrer moreover suggests that historical memory has an objective reference which poetic memory lacks, especially in modernist writing where the signifier has freed itself from the signified (Bohrer 2003, 31). I want to contest this claim and suggest that one can find traces of unconscious memory precisely in signifiers that do not only refer to a concrete reality. As we have seen above, Woolf claims that “words are full of ... memories” in the same breath as mentioning that words have many changing meanings and may free themselves from an intentional meaning given to them. By paying close attention to the signifiers, one may thus be able to uncover latent meanings that have been covered by other meanings and observe processes of displacement as Freud describes them when discussing screen memories. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud observes that the earliest childhood memories are often of marginal events, while there are no memories of important events. He claims that in a process of displacement, essential traumatic events that would have a shattering impact of the psyche are covered by memories of unimportant events, so called screen memories<sup>15</sup> (Freud 1941, 51). In Woolf’s case, one may find traces of the unspoken/unspeakable collective trauma of WWI in words and phrases that on the surface seem to refer to private memories or banalities of everyday life. Thus, personal and collective memories are mingled in Woolf’s words.

Woolf’s signifiers, often seemingly banal or involved in mere self-reflexive play can be considered as vessels hosting unconscious memory traces. As readers, we are confronted with these words in the very moment of reading – for us, they are located in the present even though what they refer to lies in the past. When a latent meaning surfaces while reading, we do not encounter this process in the past, but now. The *effect* of a memory trace uncovering itself in the process of reading a seemingly unimportant scene of everyday life is one of re-

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<sup>15</sup> I am rather concerned with the structure of this process than with Freud’s concrete example, as I do not focus on early childhood memories in my analysis of Woolf’s texts.

traumatisation: of course, we are not traumatised after reading Woolf's texts, but we experience a shattering impact of something unexpected breaking in upon us and we are involved in acting out a latent past.

To conclude, I want to give the example of a single word in order to illustrate how Woolf's language of memory functions in a symptomatic and re-traumatising manner. I wish to demonstrate how the signifier 'shell' in Woolf's texts erupts into a multiplicity of meanings and transgresses the boundary between past and present by involving readers in a process of uncovering latent traces of WWI. Originally, the word 'shell' designated a sea- or eggshell, and stood for the hard outside covering of an animal or a fruit (*OED* 1970, 672). The allusive military use referring to the metal case in which gunpowder and shot are mixed was first recorded in 1644 (*OED* 1970, 673). Shells primarily designated hand grenades. A term which renownedly emerged in WWI is 'shell shock'. Not surprisingly, the word shell had its most frequent written use with the emergence of this new compound<sup>16</sup>. The development of modern hand grenades in the early twentieth century and the excessive use of explosives in WWI did not only give war trauma the name shell-shock, 'shell' was also a widely used word in newspaper reports of the battlefield.<sup>17</sup> As a witness of this period, Woolf was aware of this use of 'shell': in bracketed references to the war in *To the Lighthouse* Woolf writes: "A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsey" (Woolf 2000b, 145). In *Mrs. Dalloway* she mentions that in the War "the last shells missed" (Woolf 2000a, 73) Septimus Smith and on Mrs. Dalloway's party, people are discussing "the deferred effects of shell-shock" (Woolf 2000a, 155). Apart from these explicit references to WWI, Woolf also frequently uses the word shell in other contexts. In these instances, however, the war still has its latent resonance that tends to flare up unexpectedly. In "A Sketch of the Past", Woolf associates shells with her personal childhood memory in two passages:

1) If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions .... I should make a picture ... of shells; of things that were semi-transparent. (Woolf 1985, 66)

2) It seems to me that a child must have a curious focus; it sees an air-ball or shell with extreme distinctness ... I still see the ... ribs of the shells, but these points are enclosed in vast empty spaces. (Woolf 1985, 78)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Google Ngram Viewer, acc. 20 Jan. 2013 <[http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=shell&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=>](http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=shell&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=>).

<sup>17</sup> To name only one: "Army Horses". *Times* 28 Dec. 1917: 9. The Times Digital Archive, acc. 20 Jan. 2013 <

On the surface, the reference to sea-shells, one of the earliest meanings of the word, is obvious and it seems to be the only implication. However, “shell” is put in a context suggesting that the word is not so clearly determined as it seems in both sentences. In the first sentence, the picture of the shell is equated with semi-transparent things, indicating that we might not see all facets of the shell (as an object and as a word) at first sight and that something may be covered. In the second sentence, the concrete material texture of a sea-shell is located in an empty space which invites to be filled, maybe with other associations the word invokes. Given that the shell functions as an image for memory and that memory and moments of being are closely related, the vocabulary used in the context of moments of being exposes the word’s WWI implications. As already pointed out, Woolf designates moments of being as shocks. The words shell and shock used in a similar context inevitably call to mind the combination of signifiers, shell-shock, and consequently war trauma. Also Woolf’s alternative designation of moments of being, “blow”, allows analogous associations: a blow indicates a strike as well as an explosion. Here the link to grenades is established on the semantic level. Similar connotations are evoked when Woolf mentions that she puts “the severed parts” resulting from the blow together to “take away the pain”. Considering the intra-textual connections, this suggest that the word “shell” in “A Sketch of the Past” exceeds the scope of personal memories. Unexpectedly, memory-traces of the way the word was used in WWI lunge out. Like Freud’s screen memories, the seemingly peripheral references to shells in a personal context cover hints to the collective trauma of shell-shock. As readers, we are exposed to this implication as soon as we discover it and participate in the process of the traumatic past erupting from a repressed domain.

A similar latent evocation of WWI through the word ‘shell’ can be observed in *The Waves*. In the novel, descriptions of a costal landscape function as structuring elements. At first sight, one would not expect any historical or political implications in such depictions of nature. However, it can be observed that the language is pervaded by military images: “The waves drummed on the shore, like *turbaned warriors*” (Woolf 2000c, 55, my emphasis) and their “spray rose like the tossing of *lances*” (Woolf 2000c, 81, my emphasis). In these depictions, the war is clearly located in a remote space, both temporally and locally: the turbaned warrior seems exotic and lances belong to the pre-industrial warfare of the past.<sup>18</sup> Beside these de-historicised and non-contemporary war-metaphors, more current references to the war become apparent as well. Later in the

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Judith Lee’s comment in her article “This Hideous Shaping and Moulding”: “[T]he ‘plumed and turbaned soldiers’ are romantic figures belonging to a distant time and place” (Lee 1991, 193).

book, Woolf replaces the turbaned warriors by “soldiers” (Woolf 2000c, 82), which is a much less archaic word for military men. In the same passage, we find the following description: birds, formerly singing “*exposed without shelter*” (Woolf 2000c, 81, my emphasis)

*descended, dry-beaked, ruthless, abrupt. They swooped suddenly from the lilac bough or the fence. They spied a snail and tapped the shell against a stone. They tapped furiously, methodically, until the shell broke and something slimy oozed from the crack.* (Woolf 2000c, 82, my emphasis)

At first sight, this scene appears to be a description of birds hunting for food, which may be considered violent, but expresses their natural behaviour. On a closer look, the scene more and more reminds of an airstrike in an industrialised war. Even though a straightforward one-to-one analogy (bird = warplane) cannot be made, the implications stand out: airstrikes were one of the most engraving innovations of WWI as a means for more effective, ‘methodical’ killing. Being “exposed without shelter” meant certain death during air raids. The mention of a fence recalls the WWI battlefield landscape determined by trenches and barbed wire fences. In this line, the shell of the snail cracked up by the birds also evokes the image of an exploding bomb. The fatal result of the attack, “something slimy oozed from the crack” calls to mind battlefield injuries.

In the two examples, the word ‘shell’, at first sight referring to something unrelated to the contemporary political situation, assumes an additional, covered meaning located in the context of WWI. When Virginia Woolf mentions that words constantly take on different meanings while still holding memories, she hints at the split between signifier and signified. Whereas the signifier remains as a physical entity, the signifieds change. When I looked at the word ‘shell’ in the two examples above, I focused on the signifier and tried to trace the signifieds it evokes. The signifier as such can be considered as a word’s shell, as its mere exterior. In this sense, words can in general be considered as memory-shells. The word ‘shell’ in particular functions in this manner in Woolf’s writing when unforeseen meanings referring to traumatic scenes suddenly burst out – when “the sealing matter cracks”, and “in floods reality”. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, such a reading is especially invited in a passage when the shell-shocked Septimus encounters the materiality of words:

The word ‘time’ split its husk; poured out its riches over him; and from his lips flew like shells, like shavings, from a plane, without his making them, hard, white imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time. (Woolf 2000a, 59)

The words Septimus perceives and produces have a life of their own and are determined by material more than by meaning. In this sense, the signifier, the



word's physical shell is put to the foreground from the beginning. Moreover, the words are compared to and equated with shells. Again, at first sight the word seems to be used in its original sense, referring to a plant, as "husk" suggests. However, the word's military use, especially the WWI implications soon break forth. In the description, the shell is split (which can mean divided or burst) and produces flying particles. This already evokes the image of an exploding grenade. The comparison of these particles to "shavings, from a plane", unleashing a multiplication of meanings through the simile, constitutes a particularly intriguing double, or triple sense. Plane in the sense of the tool used to smooth wood is first evoked by "shavings", the product thereof. At the same time, plane also designates an aircraft – as already mentioned, aviation was a defining military renewal of WWI. This ties in with the context of an explosion, hinted at earlier in the passage, as planes were primarily used for bombing in WWI. To close the circle, it is worth noting that in WWI, planes were mostly made of wood. Even though air combat was relatively rare, an attacked plane would burst into splinters, or shavings. What we encounter is an explosion of meaning, amongst others, of the word shell. Of course it also does not seem to be by coincidence that the shell-shocked Septimus encounters this scene. The connection to WWI becomes even more explicit in the next sentence, when it is mentioned that Septimus' friend Evans, a war casualty, comes back from the dead, singing "among the orchids" and it is stated that "[t]here they waited till the War was over" (Woolf 2000a, 59). One has to keep in mind that it is a very specific word which is said to explode, namely time. In the passage of *Mrs. Dalloway*, linear chronology literally blows up, resulting in a time out of joint. The past bursts into the present: all of a sudden, the deceased Evan is alive and singing, and the war still going on. What is narrated in the novel also takes place on another level: a traumatic cultural memory contained as traces in the signifier 'shell' enters the present moment when we read. We encounter these memory traces hosted by the "imperishable" signifiers not as past events, but as latent meanings revealing themselves at the very moment in a performative manner.

Reading a coherent story about a traumatic event allows readers to take a safe distance from it, and, most importantly, to locate it in the past as something which has already happened and is over now. Woolf's texts do not allow such a distance because she does not represent traumatic scenes explicitly. What may have been scriptotherapy for her is all but lectotherapy: while reading, we produce and act out the traumatic past in a performative manner. Rather than considering this as an unhealthy process of failed working through, I want to suggest that precisely such a "shock" can turn into a "revelation", like Woolf's moments of being. In "A Sketch of the Past", Woolf states that what is



revealed when she has a shock is her “constant idea ... that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this”. As already discussed, such connections are enabled by artworks. Literary texts like *The Waves* and *Mrs. Dalloway* refer back to shattering events and cause shocks for the readers, but this precisely causes a relation between us and the text we are reading: at this moment, we are involved with the words instead of merely consuming them – “we *are* the words”. The texts, which as such transcend time, allow us to produce a traumatic past we never experienced, ‘make’ memories ‘real’ and render them present. Maybe Woolf’s texts thus do not only prevent forgetting the past, but also pave the way for genuine commemorating and working through.

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